REVIVAL OF THE LEBANESE DEMOCRACY

INTRODUCTION:

In order to successfully draw a road to democracy in Lebanon, it is necessary to know the historical background and to understand the existence of the political divide amongst Lebanese groups, mainly Christians and Muslims. By acknowledging this diversity our goal is to find a system that allows all Lebanese to coexist peacefully within a free and sovereign Lebanon, and be a model of democracy among other nations in the Middle East.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

Lebanon, a country existing since biblical times, is geographically positioned to be the gate to the Middle East. By the 4th century A.D., most Lebanese have converted to Christianity and offered among the Lebanese mountains a save haven for nearby minorities. Throughout its history, conquerors have invaded it to gain strategic leverage in regional dominance. In the 7th century A.D. the Arab-Islamic armies invaded most of the seaside cities and forced the inhabitants to convert to Islam. Those who refused to leave their Christian faith took refuge in the rugged and impenetrable Lebanese mountains. The forced conversions left a permanent mark on the demographics of Lebanon with repercussions affecting Lebanon till the current day.

Since then, the history of Lebanon is filled with religious and violent conflicts, provoked by surrounding nations and often resolved by major powers intervening to secure the delicate balance among the religious groups.

The formation of a "Greater Lebanon" in 1920 with its current borders aimed to create a geopolitical entity regrouping the Christians and the Muslims. The constitution of 1926 enforced this reality by establishing a Parliamentary Democracy, unique in the fact that it is the only one in the Arab world that separates religion from state. The National Pact of 1943, following the independence from France, was based on the Christians pledge of political detachment from the West , represented by France, in exchange for the Muslims allegiance to Lebanon as a nation, living within the Arab World, but totally independent.

THE ARAB ISRAELI WARS AND LEBANON'S RECENT TURBULENCE:

The fragile equilibrium was challenged by ultra nationalist events in the Arab world re-igniting the interest of some Muslims to be a part of a bigger Muslim nation while rekindling the fears of the Christians.

Jamal Abdul Nasser quest to dominate a united Arab world in 1952 captured the imaginations of most Muslim Lebanese. Nasser's mingling in internal politics culminated in 1958 with a bloody confrontation between Christians and Muslims supported by Syria and Egypt. The Lebanese regime survived with the help of U.S intervention, but with a compromised president loyal to Nasser. After the Arab Israeli war of 1967, Palestinian guerillas began receiving arms through Syria and training in the Palestinian camps around Beirut and other main cities. The presence of an armed force other than the Lebanese army was alarming to the Christians, especially because this force greatly tipped the balance of power in favor of Muslims. The government efforts to control the illegal armed Palestinians were squashed by economical and military threats from Syria, Egypt and other Arab nations which resulted in signing the Cairo agreement of 1969, granting Palestinians freedom of conducting military operations on Lebanese soil. This only intensified after the expulsion of Palestinian Command from Jordan in 1970 and creating Fatahland in south Lebanon. While Lebanon maintained peace with Israel in the wars of 1956, 1967 and 1973, the Palestinians used their control areas to launch attacks against Israel and inviting retaliation in return. The creation of a Palestinian State within a State was regarded at the time by some Muslim and leftist Lebanese as an opportunity to grab more power which led to the civil war in 1975 and the Syrian invasion of Lebanon. The Syrian-Iranian pact after the Israeli invasion helped create radical Muslim organizations- most notably Hezbollah, to replace the Palestinians as agents of instability and facilitated the use of terror as in the 1983 Marines barracks bombing, to halt Western intervention in Lebanon. The war was halted in 1990 by crushing the Christian resistance and imposing a political status cementing the hegemony of Syria over Lebanon and tipping the political balance in favor of pro Syrian Muslims.

OBSERVATIONS:

The coexistence experience in Lebanon could have succeeded if it were not for the external interference of neighboring dictatorial regimes provoking and arming various factions while deliberately weakening the central government. The regimes of Syria, Iran and earlier Egypt, Iraq, Libya along with Palestinian forces under Arafat, have all played a crucial role in destabilizing Lebanon and undermining its religious diversity in order to gain leverage in the political landscape of the Middle East. Ultimately Syria gained dominance by playing both the roles of the arsonist and the fireman and today through its occupation it safeguards the Assad regime and exerts critical influence over the stability in the region. Calls for Syrian withdrawals by the Christians are often answered by the threat of revival of the civil war. The prospect of a Democracy, free elections, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, peaceful and proactive citizenry by Lebanese are ultimately the very real threat that frightens the Syrian regime and beyond it all the other dictatorial regimes in the Arab world. It is this threat that prompted so much interest in destabilizing Lebanon. Unfortunately, this played in the hands of many Muslim Lebanese and has led to strengthening a group of radical organizations such as Hezbollah in their quest for creating an Iran-like Islamic republic.

SOLUTIONS:

Under the current conditions and based on history, Lebanon with its pluralistic composition could only survive under a democratic system that can offer the guarantees to protect any group from being diluted or marginalized.

There are two principles that should be the basis for the future of Lebanon:

1. Internationally guaranteed sovereignty and total territorial integrity of Lebanon. The Neutrality of Lebanon would add an extra measure of assurance against any regionally instigated crisis.

2. Pluralistic Democracy which gives relative autonomy to all religious groups while allowing sufficient interaction amongst them.

The following measures should be taken to allow a suitable environment for the implementation of a political solution:

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1. The protection of individual freedoms and civil liberties.
2. The disarming and dismantling of all remaining militias.
3. The complete withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon with establishment of mutually beneficial relations.
4. Cessation of hostility between Lebanon and Israel.
5. The cancellation of all mass naturalizations issued during the last 12 years.
6. The relocation of Palestinian refugees out of Lebanon in order not to destabilize the demographic balance.
7. The release of all political prisoners and return of all exiled Lebanese.
8. Revision of all treaties signed with Syria under the occupation.
9. Free election following the implementation of new electoral law.

CONCLUSION:

The Lebanese Democracy can be revived and Lebanon can play a crucial role in spreading democracy in the Middle East. This would only be possible by a strong and long term commitment from the United States to support the freedom, independence and sovereignty of Lebanon and to assist in establishing a pluralistic and decentralized form of government that protects the rights of all religious groups. The US goal to democratize the Middle East would have a greater probability of success if after Iraq the Lebanese democracy is revived to act as a model for other Arab nations.

A free and democratic Lebanon will cease to be a source of terrorism and instability in the region and it will regain its role as a natural friend of the West and serve as a beacon of prosperity and freedom in the Middle East.